The Conservation Reserve Program

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The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is an environmental improvement program administered by the USDA's Farm Service Agency. The program, which has its roots in the 1956 Soil Bank Act, has evolved over the years. The Dust Bowl devastation in the Midwest in the 1930s focused attention on eroding cropland. The Soil Bank Act was an effort to prevent future devastation and brought about the planting of grasses or trees on many acres of marginal cropland.

The agricultural boom of the 1970s resulted in many fields and pastures being converted to cropland. Concern over damage caused by erosion and water quality degradation, coupled with falling agricultural prices, caused Congress to establish the Conservation Reserve Program in 1985. The program is voluntary, providing landowners an annual rental payment on highly erodible or environmentally sensitive cropland. Up to half the cost of establishing permanent cover (grass or trees) is also provided.

The Conservation Reserve Program has evolved from a soil erosion prevention program into one that protects the total environment, including water quality, wildlife, air quality, and other environmental benefits. Only the most environmentally sensitive land is accepted into the program.

Conservation Priority Areas

Conservation Priority Areas (CPAs) are regions targeted for CRP enrollment. There are only five national CPAs. Alabama, along with other southeastern states, is in the Longleaf Pine region. This program focuses on re-establishing the diminishing longleaf pine ecosystem. Because all environmental benefits are given consideration, emphasis is also given to wildlife practices. While converting marginal cropland to longleaf is the primary goal, wildlife habitat enhancement is addressed as well. Tree planting is done at fewer trees per acre and prescribed burning is encouraged, creating better wildlife habitat.

CRP Practices

If accepted into the program, the landowner follows a plan developed for the conversion of cropland to a less intensive use. The landowner receives annual rental payments, but must assist with the cost, establishment, and maintenance of the conservation practices.

The Conservation Reserve Program has sign-up periods for certain practices.

For some high priority conservation practices, there is no announced sign-up or waiting period. Eligible acreage can be accepted at any time for these continuous sign-up practices. The continuous sign-up accepts relatively small amounts of environmentally desirable land that serve much larger areas, such as filter strips, riparian buffers, and grass waterways.

There are specific sign-up periods for other practices. As with the continuous sign-up, eligibility must be determined before acreage is considered for the program. The environmental benefits for the land establish its ranking in comparison to other offers. Some practices are given priority. Each practice has various point values determining the intensity of the program. Of course, the higher point values, the greater the environmental impact and thus, a better chance of being accepted. For example, a CP3 (tree planting) in the 10-point category will allow trees to be planted at a higher density. The 50-point category requires trees planted at a lower density and openings.

Along with other southeastern states, Alabama is in the Longleaf Pine region, a Conservation Priority Area targeted for CRP enrollment. This program focuses on re-establishing the diminishing longleaf pine ecosystem.

The most common CRP practices approved in Alabama are listed in the table below.

Source:
USDA Farm Service Agency, PA-1063, rev. June 1999.

CRP Practice	Purpose
CP1	Establish a permanent vegetative cover of introduced grasses and legumes.
CP3	Establish a stand of trees (usually slash or loblolly); wildlife openings are often required.
CP3A	Establish a stand of predominantly hardwood trees or establish a stand of longleaf pine trees.
CP4D	Establish a permanent wildlife habitat cover.
CP10	Re-enroll land that was previously enrolled in CP1; maintenance of the cover is required.
CP11	Re-enroll land that was previously enrolled in CP3 or CP3A; maintaining timber stand is required; thinning trees and/or establishing wildlife openings may be required.
CP12	Establish annual or perennial wildlife food plots. This is done in conjunction with one of the above practices.
CP21 (Continuous sign-up)	Establish and maintain filter strips, areas of grass, legumes, and other non-woody vegetation at the lower edge of a field or adjacent to bodies of water. Filter strips significantly reduce the amount of sediment and nutrients entering the water.
CP22 (Continuous sign-up)	Establish riparian buffers and areas of trees and/or shrubs next to ponds, lakes, and streams or wetlands. The buffers filter out pollutants, provide shade for fish, and also provide food and shelter for wildlife.
CP29 (Continuous sign-up)	Establish a wildlife habitat buffer adjacent to water by restoring the native plant community on marginal pastureland. The buffers will assist in stabilizing stream banks, reducing flood damage impact, reduce runoff, and restore and enhance wildlife habitat.
CP30 (Continuous sign-up)	Establish a wetland buffer on marginal pastureland. The buffer will enhance water quality, reduce nutrient and pollutant levels, and improve wildlife habitat.
CP31 (Continuous sign-up)	Establish bottomland timber on wetlands. The timber, primarily bottomland hardwood, will help restore flood plains on land located within the recognized 100-year flood plain for a river or stream with permanent flow.